Motorcycle Pioneers

The Men, the Machines, the Events 1860-1930

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C Michael Partridge, 1976

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1915 11hp American Militaire Motorcycle

Following World War I, manufacturers in Europe found the four-cylinder formula too costly to build, and also unduly complicated when compared with the simpler but efficient single and twin-cylinder motorcycles then available. The advantage of power and weight offered by the four-cylinder formula, was far more appropriate in places like the USA, where greater distances and more varied terrain had to be covered.

The 11hp, four-cylinder American Militaire made its first appearance in 1915, having been developed as a vehicle for heavy sidecar work, particularly in the field of military warfare. The underslung, pressedsteel frame, patented three years earlier, when the machine was equipped with a steering wheel instead of handlebars, provided a low centre of gravity, and together with a longer than usual wheelbase (65in; 165.1cm) it offered a great deal of stability for the rider. The four-cylinder, overhead-valve, air-cooled motor was built on automobile principles with an enclosed fly wheel, dry plate clutch, and four-speed gearbox, with a car-style gear change lever bolted onto the engine case and forming a solid unit. Shaft drive to the rear

wheel was used. Further equipment included a self starter, foot-operated brake lever, electric head and tail lights, horn, and tool chest. The machine turned on a pivoted front axle and was kept upright by the small stabiliser wheels on the rear axle. They were raised by a small foot lever when the vehicle was under way and lowered again when running in congested districts. Thus the rider need never place his foot on the ground. Two unusual features included on this motorcycle were the reverse gear, and the 28in (71.1cm) artillery-style wheels.

Official observers from the British Army were present at the TT and other racing events in 1912, and during the same year a special series of trials were carried out over all manner of rough ground in order to determine which makes of motorcycle were most able to cope with battlefield conditions. The War Department was, however, very slow to realise the true potential of motorcycles for general military duties and therefore, when war broke out in 1914, the experienced men who answered the emergency call for dispatch riders with the British Expeditionary Force, were initially mounted on various makes of secondhand machines, until the Army was able to standardise with Douglas and Triumph, and the Royal Flying Corps, with P&M.

The Motorcycle Machine-gun Corps, was formed in 1915, some three years after Scotts had exhibited a 33hp, solo model, with a machine-gun attached to the handlebars, at the Olympia Show. The MMGC favoured Clyno and Royal Enfield V-twins with armoured sidecars and Vickers' machine-guns, while some Scott and Matchless machines were also employed in a similar role. Alfred Scott designed a built-in-one Guncar with a three-wheeled arrangement similar to that of a sidecar outfit. The suspension was better and the whole thing more robust, but the contract with the War Office he hoped for, failed to materialise. A modified version came out after the war, but this time it was called the Scott Sociable—an unorthodox-looking, three-wheeled, enclosed runabout for two people. Peacetime saw a great revival in the motorcycle trade, but the boom brought with it a rash of cheap and unsound designs, as established and new manufacturers competed against each other for the market.

